

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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A Letter to Readers

I am extremely grateful to the dedicated men and women of our agency for their professional contribution to the safety of California's motorists. The departments within the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency comprise the Governor's principal transportation regulatory and enforcement organizations. By combining their resources, we are making driving safer, as evidenced by the fact that the number of fatalities per miles traveled is now the lowest in the state's history.

As Secretary for Transportation, I am committed to having the best traffic safety programs possible, including anti-DUI, bicycle and pedestrian safety, occupant protection, police traffic services, roadway safety and emergency medical services. These programs and so many others are helping California achieve its traffic safety successes, such as having the highest seat belt compliance rate in the nation.



Maria
Contreras-Sweet

I have a charge from Governor Gray Davis to improve safety on California's roadways. That means relieving traffic congestion, thus affording people more quality time for work and family life. We all enjoy getting home quickly and safely after a hard day's work.

One of our shared goals is to alleviate traffic congestion by stopping unsafe driving behaviors that contribute to accidents. Through funding for more law enforcement personnel and equip-

ment, emergency response vehicles and public education, we will make our roads even safer. We are also excited about the new partnerships being established with community-based organizations in California. This innovation will expand our outreach enormously. The Governor recently awarded \$11.8 million to local community-based organizations to promote traffic safety programs.

Traffic safety is everyone's business. Governor Davis and I look forward to working with all of you to improve the quality of life for all Californians.

A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Maria Contreras-Sweet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Maria Contreras-Sweet

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STATE ROUTE 395

California's Newest Scenic Highway

To find Caltrans' newest designated Scenic Highway, it is necessary to ascend to the roof of California. Route 395, snaking along the eastern brow of the Sierra, runs along at an altitude that is higher than most private aircraft routinely fly, with several passes higher than 8,000 feet.

T"This is El Camino Sierra," says Tom Hallenbeck, Caltrans' energetic young manager in District 9. "This highway is really two things," he says. "It is a major interregional route for long distance travel and freight - and it is also the Eastern Sierra's Main Street."

And in addition, in Mono County, it is a scenic wonder.

Your first encounter with Mono County on Route 395 about 45 minutes south of Reno is a spectacular one: Topaz Lake, lying at 1500 m (5000 feet) altitude in today's summer sun and about as topaz as you can get.

Out on the lake, serene on a serene August day, fishing lines cast from lazily bobbing boats lace the water in quest of Topaz's storied trout. Rimming the lake is a brilliant carpet of kelly green, a sharp contrast with the dun and gray of the landscape surrounding it. At the edge of the lake is a gaggle of seagulls, happily getting their feet wet.

The towns along 395—Topaz, Coleville, Walker, Bridgeport—are testimony to a pioneer spirit that braves the awesome winters and arid summers of the eastern Sierra. And between these towns, in the lonely outback of sagebrush and rock, bungalows of various configurations huddle against the elements. A Route 395 traveler pictures their occupants

hunkered down inside, awaiting the arrival of those black helicopters from the UN you keep hearing about, or worse, aliens.

Just south of Coleville, you pass a sign that says this highway has been adopted by a local llama sales operation. Makes sense. A llama would have plenty to do out here in this rocky country, which resembles nothing so much as the arid side of the Andes.

District 9 surely must have the most successful Adopt-A-Highway program in the state. "Mono County folks are proud of their road," says Hallenbeck. "Virtually every stretch of Route 395 that could be adopted not only has been, but there's a waiting list for a lot of areas." Hallenbeck tells of one resident who moved from Mammoth to Santa Barbara, but who would return several weekends a year to do his stint on the roadside.

Walker is the gateway to the Walker River Canyon, where Caltrans showed its mettle five years ago, reopening Route 395 within six months after a devastating flood that washed out most of 16 km (10 miles) of the highway. As you drive south along the river, great gouges in the riverbank give abundant evidence of the river's rampage.





California's Newest Scenic Highway

"I could feel it coming," says Buddy Bayer, Maintenance Supervisor for the Lee Vining Maintenance Station. "It snowed four to five feet in one weekend, then we got a warm spring rain. Everything came down, and when it did, it took the highway with it."

Will the road stay there the next time?

"It ought to," said Hallenbeck, who headed the design team for the reconstruction. "We designed every kind of armor available to us into that highway."



A trip along Route 395 in Mono County provides a shifting palette of color and beauty.

The Walker River reconstruction team won plaudits from a host of agencies for its fix of the river channel as well as of the road. Employing a geomorphologist, Caltrans replaced eddies and river veins and planted the channel with native plant species. So far, it has paid off. Fishing must be good, judging by the number of anglers on the bank. And the road looks like it's there to stay.

Through this canyon, a driver had best leave early for any appointments. On this twisting, two-lane highway, you travel mostly at 65 km/h (40 MPH) in caravans headed up by bulbous RVs towing Volkswagens, followed impatiently by seven or eight macho SUVs. The SUV drivers keep edging over the centerline for an opportunity to pass.

Mono County's seat is in Bridgeport, whose architecture bears the signature of the pioneers who settled there more than a century and a half ago. With the exception of the great white pile of a county courthouse that owes its style more to the ancient Greeks than to Billy the Kid, this is arguably a cow town, plunked down in the midst of a grand high-Sierra valley that looks as if maybe it was the

inspiration for the old Bonanza TV series. Bridgeport hosts an annual rodeo to show you what life in the old west was like.

Heading south for 30 km (18 miles) through pastures, 395 then ascends to the 2480 m (8136-foot) Conway Summit, which yields a breathtaking view of a jewel among a county full of them. At your feet, from a thoughtfully-provided vista point, is Mono Lake, the focal point of a huge natural basin ringed by rugged peaks. Up here, you really can see forever, to mountains as much as 200 km (120 miles) away.

Beautiful as it is, Mono Lake isn't the kind of mountain lake you think it ought to be. No trout here. Alkali and brine have been washing into this lake for millennia, making the lake uninhabitable for the creatures you normally associate with alpine lakes. Nevertheless, it's an ecological soup for the thousands of seagulls that fly in from the coast each year to mate and chomp on the brine shrimp that live in Mono's icky waters.

Mother Nature got pretty creative around Mono Lake. Sagebrush, Jeffrey pines, volcanoes, tufa towers, gulls, grebes, alkali flies and fresh and alkaline waters comprise a world at a transition between the Sierra and the Great Basin Desert. Pronghorn antelope graze in the Bodie Hills while yellow-bellied marmots bask in the summer sun. Great Basin spadefoot toads fill the evening air with a chorus of croaking while nighthawks hunt for insects in twilight. Wilson's Phalaropes feast on alkali flies in preparation for their non-stop flight to South America.

Embracing 14 different ecological zones, more than 1000 plant species, and roughly 400 recorded vertebrate species within its watershed, Mono Lake and its surrounding basin encompass one of California's richest natural areas.

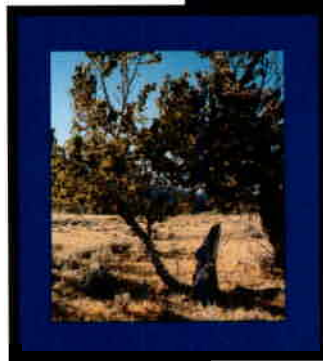
Lee Vining (the town) overlooks Mono Lake. According to Buddy Bayer, who knows just about everything there is to know about Mono County, Lee Vining (the miner) founded Lee Vining. He struck a pretty good vein there, but



later found a better one over in Bodie. Vining's life ended when his gun fell out of his holster onto the floor of his buckboard and shot him.

Bayer, who is retiring in a couple months, has been around this country for most of his life, with the exception of three years when he went off to work on the Nimitz Freeway in Oakland. He's happy to be back in a county whose name, "mono", means beautiful in Paiute. And looking around at these mountains, lakes and high meadows, we'd have to agree with the Paiutes.

Cowtown, county seat, mining town, Bridgeport shows off its Western heritage with an annual rodeo.



South of Lee Vining, you see the first evidence of District 9's objective, worked out with nearby cities, counties, planning agencies and other state and federal outfits that oversee 98 percent of the land up here, to provide a four-

lane highway all the way from Lee Vining to Route 395's junction with Route 14, just above Inyokern. Yeager Construction Company is building a 20 km (12-mile) project to convert the highway to four lanes.

California's Newest Scenic Highway

This is Mother Nature's country, especially today, with the onset of a summer thunderstorm. Virga descends out of puffy cumulo-nimbi; the rays of a blazing August sun remind you of that great old Hebrew National Franks television commercial. It's a painter's palette – azure lakes with brilliant green fringes around them, earth tones on mountains that are dappled by snowy glaciers. A traveler who stops along the roadside is rewarded by the delicate smell of mountain heather.

In the late 1980s, Caltrans tried to fool with Mother Nature along Route 395, as it continues south toward Mammoth, by installing special fences with modules that rotated and, theoretically, aligned themselves with changing winds. That was supposed to drop drifting snow before it reached the highway. The fences worked, but conventional ones were just as good.

Dead Man Summit, 25 km (15 miles) south of Lee Vining, is among the highest of four Mono County summits that, with a good snow storm, can yield a solid 200 km (125 miles) of chain controls. (The dead man, by the way, was a postman trying to get the mail through on skis. The mail eventually got through, but he didn't. Bayer relates that the mailman's boots remain nailed to a tree near the summit.) Route 395 provides an astonishingly smooth ride, in view of the fact that chaining-up is an all-too-frequent occurrence in wintertime.

From this summit, you descend into the awesome Long Valley Caldera, at the eye of which lies one of the nation's grandest ski areas, Mammoth. Those impatient skiers are a good reason behind Caltrans' objective of providing four lanes down to Route 14.

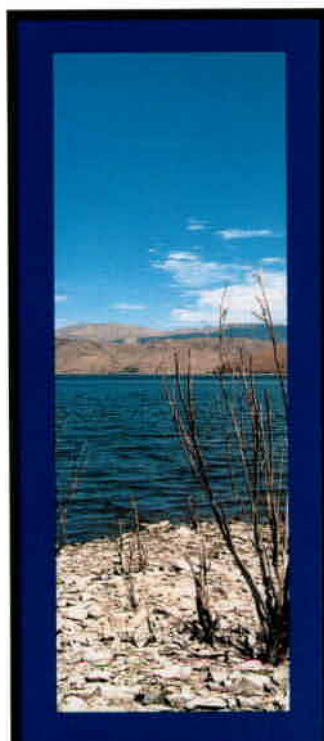
There's a whole lotta shakin' goin' on here. Maybe it's because, as Buddy Bayer says, 21 volcanoes ring the area. The Caldera was formed about 760,000 years ago in an eruption that blasted out 150 cubic miles of magma from beneath the Earth's surface. If you're counting, that's an explosion 2500 times as big as the one at Mount St. Helens. It blew ash all the way to Nebraska and dumped a blanket of regurgitated earth around Bishop that was 150 m (500 feet) thick.

It ain't over yet. Earthquake activity has picked up greatly since 1978 and, mindful of the potential for another blowout, Hallenbeck and his people participate regularly in disaster exercises with other agencies to keep the transportation link open should another earthquake occur.

There's one last outlook as you're descending out of Mono County, this one at Sherwin Summit, where Bishop's great valley spreads out at your feet. To gaze upon the Owens Valley is to know that the Los Angeles Water and Power Agency, right here, defined once and for all the antithetical notions of Northern and Southern California. And that notion lies around water. Whether or not the agency's purchase of water rights in the early 20th century ruined this valley, as some contend, is moot.

The valley as you descend into it, is a welcoming pastiche of greens, almost like a carpet on which you land after flying so high in Mono County.

In all of this, Caltrans sits serenely in Bishop, an outpost far from the hurly-burly of California's busy cities, but nevertheless keenly attuned to its job of keeping travel flowing. And Tom Hallenbeck, Buddy Bayer and their comrades in District 9 intend to keep the Eastern Sierra's main street open and moving, whatever Mother Nature may dish out.



**Mono Lake: an
ecological soup
that nourishes all
manner of exotic
life forms.**

Scenic Highway Program

California's Scenic Highway Program was created by the legislature in 1963 to protect scenic highway corridors from change that would diminish their aesthetic value. A highway may be designated scenic depending upon how much of the landscape can be seen by travelers, its scenic quality, and the extent to which development intrudes upon the traveler's enjoyment of the view.

Local agencies nominate highways for official designation identifying and defining the scenic corridor and adopting ordinances to preserve scenic quality. A scenic corridor is the land generally visible from a motorist's line of vision. If the view extends to the horizon, a city or county may select a reasonable boundary. Minimum requirements for scenic corridor protection include regulation of land use and density of development; land and site planning; control of outdoor advertising, earthmoving and landscaping; and attention to design and appearance of structures and equipment.

A city or county with jurisdiction over lands next to the highway must inspect and evaluate the route to determine if it meets current criteria. It then adopts

a protection program and submits a resolution to the Departmental Transportation Advisory Committee through an appropriate Caltrans district office. After review, the committee can recommend that the Caltrans director designate the highway as scenic.

Caltrans places the colorful "poppy" sign, logo of the scenic highway program, along the route. The poppy logo identifies scenic highways on travel maps, and others produced by the State Division of Tourism.

Official scenic highway status does not restrict highway improvements. However, Caltrans works with appropriate agencies to coordinate transportation proposals and maintenance activities to protect the corridor as much as possible.

Designation does not preclude development, but the program encourages development that does not degrade a corridor's scenic value.

Caltrans checks scenic highways at least every five years to assure that they remain scenic and may revoke the designation if local agencies cease to protect them. In addition, a city or county may request revocation if it no longer wishes to be part of the program.

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